

Date: Dec. 7, 2025

Texts: Isaiah 9. 1-2 / Matt. 4. 12-17

Title: "The People that Walked in Darkness" (Messiah XII)

## **Intro -**

one one level - we are living in dark times...

the winter solstice is just around the corner, and - as we all know -

the days have shortened... are getting shorter...

on another level - today is a reminder of a particularly dark time -

a "date which will live in infamy..."

as FDR immortalized the attack on Pearl Harbor

(which brings us a little closer to the lived experience  
of the people to whom Isaiah wrote...)

pick your level...

historical...

cosmological...

social... cultural... political... economic...

we are not unacquainted with "dark times..."

and yet...

these calendar related dark times are heading to a terminal point

- where they halt and reverse...

(not coincidentally - right before Christmas...)

sunlight hours begin to lengthen, as the light remains with us -

just a little bit more each day

cf. - in our world, this is a gradual thing... a little bit more - each day...

in other experiences of darkness (pearl harbor...) -

it took great sacrifice...

and still took a long time... with an uncertain outcome...

by way of contrast...

by way of "something more promising..."

what Isaiah proclaims here is all about ...

... a light shining on a people walking in darkness  
like a brilliant dawn suddenly breaking through...  
- the kind of light that gives direction and drives out fear

let's consider the people of his day...  
the darkness they experienced...  
and how they heard this  
and then -  
how might we hear it...?  
what difference might it make for us...?

## **I) Darkness and Distress**

Isaiah speaks this prophecy of light into a moment of tremendous fear  
for the people of Israel -

a time of “darkness and distress...”

Assyrian invaders have attacked the northern kingdom...

they have sheared away portions of Israel  
to create Assyrian provinces...

this prophecy comes against this backdrop of military occupation  
under which Israel struggles to live  
- and into which...

Isaiah preaches a word of hope  
(let's unpack that a bit...)

### **1. The backdrop...**

this was not a good time...  
we only have to see and read of events in Ukraine  
to try and get a feel for what's going on...  
what they were trying to live through...  
and yet...

Into this, Isaiah speaks a word of light...  
a word that can change us...

relate - The Greek word for repentance... for change... is *metanoia*.

That word occurs again and again in the writings of Plato,

the Greek philosopher — notably in his famous parable of the cave...

(you hopefully had some measure of a classical education

somewhere, and are “passing familiar” with this...)

Plato describes how we human beings live our lives like prisoners

chained inside a dark cave, facing a wall.

Behind us is a blazing fire, the only source of light.

All we can see are flickering shadows on the cave wall.

Not knowing any better, we assume those shadows are reality.

Finally, one man breaks his chains and escapes. For the first time in

his life, he steps out into the sunshine of the real world.

That lucky escapee experiences a *metanoia*.

He sees life in a completely new way.

he is changed...

Few people in this life are so fortunate, warns Plato.

Few of us see things as they really are.

Most of us are accustomed to life in the gloom.

We grow to love the deceiving shadow-figures. They are our reality,

and we laugh at anyone who suggests that life could be otherwise.

and - let's be clear - it takes courage to preach hope (as Isaiah does...)

in the midst of such desolation

it also takes sensitivity

(in that people who live in the gloom of anguish...

might find a word of hope to be shallow... to be disconnected

from their pain... from their suffering...)

Isaiah does not speak thus...

nor does he speak as one who can afford to hope -

because he is exempt from suffering...

he is removed from the pain of his community

rather - he speaks as a part of the larger group -  
the people who walk in darkness,,,  
he speaks with authority...  
he speaks with passion...  
he speaks with the confidence that God is still present, and -  
that God will bring us into “the real world of his light...”

## **II) The Greatness of the Light**

... he speaks to us

Isaiah reminds us of the importance of imagination in faith -  
the capacity to see beyond things as they are...  
and to imagine things as they might be  
he reminds us not to lower our sights  
(which is all too easy to do...)

cf. - per Nobel prize-winning poet, Czeslaw Milosz:

“Imagination can fashion the world into a homeland  
as well as into a prison or place of battle. ...

Nobody lives in the “objective” world, only in a world filtered  
through the imagination.”

how is the world filtered through our imaginations...?

Isaiah wants to be sure we do not get too comfortable with  
the status quo...  
not satisfied with anything less than the release of  
those held captive...  
to envision (and work to make real) the end of war...  
and the lifting of the burden of oppression  
from people everywhere

Isaiah offers a vision of what is possible, and -  
it begins with “light...”

- a great light...

a light that breaks through to illuminate the path

(of those who walk in darkness, fear, and pain)

a path that leads us outward...

into the world...

to shine the light into nooks and crannies

where the darkness has yet to be

pushed back...

cf. - Elizabeth Gilbert (of “Eat, Pray, Love” renown, among other books...)

“Some years ago, I was stuck on a crosstown bus in New York City during rush hour. Traffic was barely moving. The bus was filled with cold, tired people who were deeply irritated — with one another; with the rainy, sleety weather; with the world itself. Two men barked at each other about a shove that might or might not have been intentional. A pregnant woman got on, and nobody offered her a seat. Rage was in the air; no mercy would be found here.

But as the bus approached Seventh Avenue, the driver got on the intercom. “Folks,” he said, “I know you’ve had a rough day and you’re frustrated. I can’t do anything about the weather or traffic, but here’s what I can do. As each one of you gets off the bus, I will reach out my hand to you. As you walk by, drop your troubles into the palm of my hand, okay? Don’t take your problems home to your families tonight — just leave ’em with me. My route goes right by the Hudson River, and when I drive by there later, I’ll open the window and throw your troubles in the water. Sound good?”

It was as if a spell had lifted. Everyone burst out laughing. Faces gleamed with surprised delight. People who’d been pretending for the past hour not to notice each other’s existence were suddenly grinning at each other like, is this guy serious?

Oh, he was serious.

At the next stop — just as promised — the driver reached out his hand, palm up, and waited.

One by one, all the exiting commuters placed their hand just above his and mimed the gesture of dropping something into his palm. Some people laughed as they did this, some teared up — but everyone did it.

(Gilbert continues...)

We live in a hard world, my friends. Sometimes it's extra difficult to be a human being. Sometimes you have a bad day. Sometimes you have a bad day that lasts for several years. ... There are times when everything seems cloaked in darkness. You long for the light but don't know where to find it.

But what if *you* are the light? What if you're the very agent of illumination that a dark situation begs for?

That's what this bus driver taught me — that anyone can be the light, at any moment. ...

No matter who you are, or where you are, or how mundane or tough your situation may seem, I believe you can illuminate your world. In fact, I believe this is the only way the world will ever be illuminated — one bright act of grace at a time, all the way to the river..."

do the people who walk in darkness...

(and there are so many who do... right here... right now...)

do they see a great light...

... in us?